

Let's Talk About...

Emotional response to illness, injury and healthcare

Illness, injury and receiving healthcare can be upsetting. Even a very short time in the hospital can be difficult, such as a same-day surgery or an emergency room visit.

Your child may have pain and discomfort. They may be separated from parents and family. Your child could also lose privacy and movement and miss their normal routines. Your fears or worries may also affect your child.

The emotional experience of being in a hospital can change your child's behavior. These changes may continue for a while after your child goes home.

What are some common changes I might notice?

Your child may do some of the following things at the hospital or at home:

- Demand more attention
- Pretend to have an illness or injury or go to the hospital
- Show signs of regression by acting younger than they are (demanding a bottle, using a pacifier or sucking their thumb, whining, having tantrums or losing control of their bladder or bowels)
- Have an increased startle response
- Be on alert at all times, because they fear parents will leave or something scary or painful will happen
- Have trouble sleeping or resist bedtime
- Have nightmares
- Be afraid when separated from caregivers
- Be more afraid of strangers
- Scratch, pick, or bite nails
- Change their eating patterns
- Cry and cling more

- Wet the bed
- Respond angrily more often
- Act out or behave in a way that is against the rules
- Fear doctors or other healthcare providers
- Be more concerned about the body and its function
- Be afraid of or more curious about death
- It is normal for your child to have any of these behavior changes while in the hospital or after going home, even if they were only in the hospital for a few hours or a day.

How can I help my child feel better?

You can support and comfort your child both in the hospital and at home when you notice any of the signs above.



While in the hospital:

- Stay in the same room with your child, if possible. This can help your child feel safer.
- Get plenty of rest and eat regular meals. Your stress and health directly affect your child.
- Encourage your family to connect with your child. They can't always visit your child, but they can call, send photos or cards. You can make a video of family greetings or of a friend telling a story.

- Be involved in your child’s care. You and your knowledge of your child will help the healthcare providers. You know your child’s likes, dislikes, routines and typical behaviors.
- Help your child to eat, play, nap, and go to bed at regular times, as much as possible. This helps your child feel they know what will happen next.
- Let your child choose whenever possible. They can decide what they will eat and whether to drink juice or milk. They could also choose to have their temperature measured in the right ear or left ear. Having choices helps your child feel they are in control.
- Do not offer a choice when there really is no choice. For example, when your child has no choice about when medicine can be taken, tell them: “It is time to take your medicine now.” Do not say: “It’s time to take your medicine, okay?”
- Prepare your child. Ask your child’s healthcare provider to contact a child life specialist before your child has a procedure or surgery. They can give your child accurate information about what will happen in a way that is right for their age. This helps your child cope, even for children who are one year old.
- Increase your child’s sense of trust. If you leave your child, tell them when and why you are leaving and when you will return. Write down important phone numbers and leave them at your child’s bedside. If you can’t return to the hospital when you expected to, call your child about the delay. Your child may be sad or angry, but they won’t worry that you’ll leave without telling them.
- Support your child’s development. Even in the hospital, play is how children learn, grow and cope. Active play can also help them work out feelings of being frustrated or upset while in the hospital. Interacting with other patients will make things more normal for your child as well.

After going home:

Keep the normal rules, limits, and expectations. It may take time for your child to return to regular routines and schedules. However, it is best to practice the same parenting style as you did before the hospital stay.

- Help your child process the hospital experience. For example, play “hospital” or “doctor” with your child, and have them talk about what happened in the hospital. Read stories about the hospital with your child. Draw pictures or write notes to the hospital staff. Children, especially young children, often need to relive their experience over and over for several weeks. If you need ideas, contact a child life specialist.
- Be patient. It’s important to support your child as much as possible. Try not to punish your child if you notice regressive behavior (see list above) or if your child needs extra time and attention. Being patient with your child’s behavior changes will help them return to normal faster.
- Reassure your child that they only go to the hospital when they are sick or hurt. Many children worry that they may suddenly go back to the hospital without warning. They don’t understand that illness, injury, and healthcare are not punishments.

How long will my child’s behavior changes last?

It is normal for behavior changes to last up to 4–6 weeks after your child goes home from the hospital. If you notice behavior changes that last longer, or if behavior changes seem extreme, your child may need a little extra help returning to their usual routine.

What if I have questions about my child’s behavior?

If you have concerns or want ideas for helping your child, talk to a child life specialist or social worker in the child life department at 801.662.3701. You can also ask your child’s healthcare provider to refer you to a local child therapist.

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